The Last Arab–Israeli Battlefield?

Implications of an Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon

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A Washington Institute for Near East Policy Monograph
The Role of UNIFIL after an Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon

By John Hillen

Although the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon is officially titled an “interim force” whose mission is reviewed and extended twice yearly, the UN harbors no illusions about a quick exit from the area under any scenario. Like many other actors present over the past two decades, UNIFIL—the UN Interim Force in Lebanon—is deeply woven into the fractious fabric of political, economic, and social life in southern Lebanon. Moreover (again, like most other actors in the area), the UN would not wish to take sole or even primary responsibility for peace and security in southern Lebanon even after a withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Nonetheless, it is quite conceivable that, under certain scenarios, UNIFIL would somehow act to fill the security vacuum left by an IDF withdrawal. In the event of either a comprehensive peace agreement or even an IDF withdrawal closely coordinated with the government of Lebanon and other actors, UNIFIL could well expand in both size and operational potency in the attempt to fulfill its original mandate. The light of regional stability at the end of a more than twenty-year tunnel of frustration could convince the UN Security Council to reinforce the UNIFIL peacekeepers in order to take advantage of developments in southern Lebanon. Recent events both at the UN and in the region augur for this possibility. At its headquarters in New York, the UN appears to be rebounding from its disastrous experimentation with the large, expensive, and dangerous peacekeeping missions lasting from 1993 to 1996. In the autumn of 1999 alone, the UN approved new missions to Kosovo, East Timor, Congo, and Sierra Leone—moves that will more than double the number of “Blue Helmets” worldwide. In the Middle East, the recent pronouncements of Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak’s government regarding an IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon have prompted

The views expressed in this chapter are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Commission on National Security or the U.S. government.
policymakers to consider the possible political scenarios and maneuvers discussed in other chapters of this study. If the major players in the area purposefully support the peace, the UN may take extra steps to have UNIFIL support their efforts.

Under the right circumstances and conditions, UNIFIL could play an important role. Under unfavorable circumstances such as a unilateral and uncoordinated IDF withdrawal, however, UNIFIL is unlikely of its own accord to step into a volatile security vacuum to enforce peace and security in southern Lebanon. Throughout this process, even a reinforced UNIFIL will insist that it act only as a supporting player whose actions should complement the willful and peaceable intentions of the principals—namely Israel and Lebanon (and probably Syria). If the IDF withdrawal takes place under conditions that leave southern Lebanon in disarray, it is unlikely that UNIFIL will attempt to fulfill its mandate to help restore peace and security to the region.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF UNIFIL

In an examination of UNIFIL’s twenty-two-year history, one fact stands out: UNIFIL was created and has survived as a stop-gap political measure, not as an operational tool for the execution of its mandate on the ground. Numerous studies (especially Israeli) that criticize the operational efficacy and seeming impotence of UNIFIL miss this point. The operation was never structured to succeed in traditional military terms. In fact, its consistent military ineffectiveness is well known and perhaps even purposeful. Since the day of its inception up to its most recent operations, UNIFIL’s military effectiveness has always been sacrificed on the altar of political expediency. It is a mission that was hastily created to serve needs other than the tactical situation in southern Lebanon and this remains the case. Moreover, the UN is an institution that is expert in the use of passive and inert military forces employed as a confidence-building measure rather than as active military units applying coercive force to influence an adversary. This accounts in large measure for UNIFIL’s essentially passive character, which will not be significantly altered operationally after an IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon. It is therefore worthwhile to explore UNIFIL’s origin and history before turning to an analysis of its current operations and role in various withdrawal scenarios.

UNIFIL was born in the wake of the events of March 11, 1978, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) seized an Israeli bus south of Haifa. In the ensuing clash with Israeli security forces, nine PLO guerrillas were killed along with thirty-seven Israeli citizens. The IDF launched its invasion of Lebanon three days later, on the night of March 14–15, 1978. That day, the government of Lebanon lodged a strong protest with the UN Security Council against the invasion. The
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Security Council met at Lebanon’s request on March 17 to consider the issue, and the United States took the lead in drafting a resolution to help ameliorate the situation.

The principal factor motivating the urgent U.S. call for Security Council action in the form of this resolution was the need to avoid damaging the Camp David peace conference between Egypt and Israel, scheduled to start on March 21 of that year. Consequently, the United States brought much pressure to bear in the Security Council to quickly create a UN peacekeeping force for southern Lebanon. Brian Urquhart, then–UN undersecretary general for special political affairs (and therefore entrusted with all peacekeeping missions) had strong reservations about placing such a force in the area:

The hard facts of the situation militated against deploying such a force. Government authority, an important condition for successful peacekeeping, did not exist in southern Lebanon, where a tribal, inter-confessional guerrilla war was raging. The terrain of southern Lebanon was ideal for guerrilla activity and very difficult for conventional forces. The PLO, a dominating factor in the area, was under no formal authority. Another important element, the Israeli-sponsored Christian militia of the volatile Major Saad Haddad, though illegal, would certainly be supported by Israel. A force of the size and with the mandate necessary for the job was unlikely to be agreed upon by the Security Council. Southern Lebanon would almost certainly be a peacekeeper’s nightmare.²

Despite these misgivings held by the UN’s top peacekeeping official, the U.S.-drafted resolution was passed almost immediately (with abstentions by the USSR and Czechoslovakia) as Resolution 425 on March 19, 1978, and UNIFIL was thereby established. The broad mandate given to this force required it “to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces, restore international peace and security, and assist the government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area.”³ More important for operational considerations, the last paragraph of the resolution asked the secretary general to submit a plan for the implementation of this resolution within twenty-four hours of the resolution’s passing.⁴

The “terms of reference” that constituted UNIFIL’s operational basis reflected this rushed, ad hoc, and incomplete planning. The UN used, as an operational guideline, the terms for the United Nations Emergency Force II (UNEF II) and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Sinai and on the Golan Heights, respectively, two traditional (and ongoing) peacekeeping missions that the UN considered “satisfactory.”⁵ The terms of reference were built around the principles of peacekeeping, a passive doctrine that reflects self-imposed limitations on the use of military force. The effect of UNIFIL’s passive terms of reference has handicapped the force ever since, and will do so.
in future operations that may follow an IDF withdrawal. More robust rules of engagement are not likely to be attempted, as they would necessitate an entirely different force structure and modus operandi than that used by UNIFIL for the past twenty-two years.

UNIFIL is very much a creature of the hurried circumstances surrounding its birth, when important predeployment operational considerations that had always been key imperatives of peacekeeping missions were ignored; in particular, the issues of clearly defining UNIFIL’s area of operations and ensuring that the force would have the consent and cooperation of the local factions remained unaddressed. The UN itself recognized that “these two questions weighed heavily on the operations of UNIFIL.” But as Brian Urquhart recalls, these kinds of practical considerations were “swept aside” by the determination to push through a quick decision.

The terrain and military objectives of UNIFIL’s mandate necessitated a force far larger than that which the Security Council considered “normal” for traditional peacekeeping missions. Military requirements centered exclusively on meeting the mandate of Resolution 425 would have demanded a force closer in size and strength to that of the 1960s Congo operation (20,000) than to that of the UN force then in the Sinai, UNEF II (7,000). But the political imperatives and conditions that influence UN missions were paramount and could not be so easily dismissed. Because all the parties concerned with the situation in southern Lebanon were reluctant to accept a large force, UNIFIL was structured and employed as a small, traditional peacekeeping force of under 5,000 (later increased to just over 6,000). No one in the United Nations had a desire for a repeat of the Congo episode, one that William Durch said “was nearly as searing for the UN as the Vietnam War [was] for the United States.”

ANALYSIS OF UNIFIL OPERATIONS
Although the UN is frank about UNIFIL’s inability to accomplish its stated goals over the past twenty-two years, the political objectives of UNIFIL remain those listed above in Resolution 425. In turn, the military contingents of UNIFIL have military objectives that support each of those goals. These objectives are derived from traditional peacekeeping practice, which maintains that the objectives and modus operandi should be determined in light of several conditions: the strict impartiality of the UN force, the use of the force in a passive manner, the use of arms only in self-defense, and most important, the assumption that the UN force will enjoy the cooperation of the local factions. Given the UN’s unpleasant experience with more active forms of “peace enforcement” in Bosnia and Somalia, these passive rules of engagement are not likely to change substantially in the future.
In the early days of UNIFIL, the rushed and poorly executed deployment of lightly armed and passive peacekeepers might have had some positive impact, had the local factions been as cooperative on the ground as the Security Council hoped they would be. But the collapse of that crucial assumption, coupled with UNIFIL’s imprecise plan of operations, served to cripple military effectiveness from the start. As a result, UNIFIL was given unrealizable objectives as a peacekeeping force operating with a traditional peacekeeping modus operandi. In addition to UNIFIL’s seemingly impossible tasks, the military mismanagement of the force contributed even further to its ineffectiveness. A brief review of UNIFIL’s record with regard to its three tasks follows:

Task 1: Confirm the Withdrawal of Israeli Forces
UNIFIL has sporadically attempted to realize the mission of confirming the withdrawal of the IDF from southern Lebanon since the invasion of 1978. In theory, this would entail observing and reporting on the status of the IDF in southern Lebanon as well as occupying the former IDF positions with an eye toward returning them to the proper Lebanese authorities. For the UNIFIL battalions in the field, this involved the establishment of stationary observation posts (OPs) and traffic control points, undertaking patrols, and conducting relief-in-place operations on IDF positions. The intention was to occupy a traditional interpositional buffer zone (as in the Golan Heights) to keep the local factions separated.¹⁰ (See map, next page)

UNIFIL experienced little success in the accomplishment of this mission until after the Israeli invasion of 1982. During that operation, UNIFIL’s response, like most of its operations, was inconsistent and varied greatly by national contingent. Some contingents put up a brief armed fight, some merely stood aside, and some tried passive measures such as establishing roadblocks. Much of this varied response was due to ambiguity about the concept of “self-defense.” Officially, UNIFIL’s peacekeepers are authorized to use force “when attempts are made to prevent them from performing their duties under the mandate of the Security Council.”¹¹ This was interpreted as a rule of engagement that allowed the peacekeepers to use the force of arms not only in personal self-defense, but also in defense of their mandate when under armed attack.¹² When confronted with an overwhelming force such as an Israeli armored column, however, the futility, ambiguity, and subjectivity of these rules of engagement became evident. They left too much room for interpretation, and, given the traditional lack of a unified approach to UNIFIL operations, were interpreted differently. Traditional peacekeepers such as those in UNIFIL or UNDOF have not had the ability or mandate to formulate a “backup” plan when consent and cooperation break down.
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- Bint Jubayl
- Qintara
- Marjayoun
- Al-Khiyam
- Qleia
- IRISH BATTALION
- NEPALESE BATTALION
- FIJIAN BATTALION
- GHANAIAN BATTALION
- FINNISH BATTALION
- Brashit
- INDIAN BATTALION*
- Kaoukaba
- Al-Khiyam
- Nabatiyya
- Marjayoun
- Qleia
- Tyre
- Naqoura
- Mediterranean Sea
- Lebanon
- Israel
- Mediterranean Sea

*Note: The Indian Battalion's area of operation is not clearly defined, but is located in the northeastern part of the Israeli security zone.

Map: D. Swanson/Equator Graphics, Inc.

UNIFIL-ADMINISTERED AREAS

UNIFIL area of operation
Approximate area under Israeli control
UNIFIL/IDF area
UNIFIL operational boundaries
UNIFIL inter-battalion boundaries
UNIFIL Headquarters
City

UNIFIL-ADMINISTERED AREAS

*Note: The Indian Battalion’s area of operation is not clearly defined, but is located in the northeastern part of the Israeli security zone.
By June 8, 1982, the entire UNIFIL area of operations was under IDF control, and since 1982, the IDF and the South Lebanon Army (SLA) have maintained virtual control over much of southern Lebanon. This left UNIFIL operating in occupied territory that, as Alan James noted, has made “the terms of its original mandate even less applicable than they had ever been to the situation on the ground.” In 1985, the IDF again carried out a three-phase withdrawal that left most of the old enclave and some additional territory north of the Litani River in the hands of the IDF and the SLA. Israel saw this zone as vital to providing security to its border—a goal that Israel insists UNIFIL is unable to accomplish. Even after this Israeli withdrawal, the security zone included more than seventy armed IDF/SLA positions in the UNIFIL area of operations.

Hostilities between Israel and opposing factions in southern Lebanon have continued at varying degrees of intensity since 1985 and are recounted elsewhere in this study. Some events of particular concern for UNIFIL, however, should be noted here. In July 1993, the IDF launched a large operation principally consisting of air and artillery attacks against Hizballah in response to rocket assaults on Israel. Faced by heavy criticism from the UN over the hundreds killed and wounded in that attack, Israeli authorities concluded a ceasefire with Hizballah and insisted that the security zone was only a “temporary arrangement.” Again in April 1996, Hizballah escalated its attacks on Israel—firing some four hundred katyusha rockets into the security zone and seventy into Israeli cities and villages in the Galilee. Israel responded with Operation Grapes of Wrath, a massive artillery bombardment against Hizballah and civilian infrastructure targets in Lebanon. Worldwide attention was once again drawn to the conflict when the IDF accidentally shelled a UN refugee camp at Qana, killing more than one hundred Lebanese civilians.

Diplomatic efforts by the United States, France, and the UN helped to bring about the April 1996 Understanding between Israel, Lebanon, Hizballah, and Syria (see Appendix D). Under the terms of this understanding, both Hizballah and Israel agreed not to endanger or carry out attacks against civilians or civilian-populated areas. Both parties, however, retained the right to self-defense. The understanding thus served more to draw new parameters for protecting civilians than to end the fighting in southern Lebanon. Even so, the understanding has since had the effect of significantly lowering cross-border violence and civilian casualties.

**Task 2: Restore Peace and Security in the Region**

UNIFIL’s goals in this respect have centered on “preventing the recurrence of fighting, ensuring the peaceful character of the area of operations, and to that end, controlling movement into and out of the zone.” Within its zone of operation, UNIFIL has worked to (1) conduct mobile patrols and occupy observation posts and checkpoints on roads; (2) de-
tect, halt, and disarm armed infiltrators in the area of operations; and (3) deny movement to belligerent parties in the area of operations intent on conducting hostile actions.\(^\text{19}\) Despite UNIFIL’s imperfect and greatly undermanned buffer zone, Gen. Emmanuel Erskine, one of the first force commanders, stated that the main objective of UNIFIL in its initial phase of operations was “to prevent contact between the two groups [IDF/SLA and the PLO].”\(^\text{20}\)

Most successful conventional peacekeeping missions—including the UN deployments in the Sinai and on the Golan Heights—have had well-defined and sparsely populated buffer zones. By contrast, with UNIFIL’s basic function, jurisdiction, and even physical area less than clearly determined, the peacekeepers could only react to Israeli and PLO moves. They could not set their own “terms of battle.” In fact, in March 1978, the IDF was still expanding its own area of operations as the terms of reference for UNIFIL were being completed in New York. By September 1978, when the UNIFIL area of operations had solidified, its headquarters at Naqoura, the guard detachment at Tyre, the Norwegian and Nepalese battalions in the northeast sector, and five permanent observation posts on the Lebanese–Israeli border had all been isolated from the main body of UNIFIL’s six infantry battalions.

Each of these isolated detachments—including UNIFIL’s headquarters—was subject to constant harassment, frequent attacks, and virtual states of siege by the belligerents in southern Lebanon, being without mutual support from other UNIFIL elements. For instance, the French detachment in the Tyre area fought a running gun battle against PLO elements in May 1978, resulting in the loss of three French soldiers and the wounding of fourteen more, including the battalion commander.\(^\text{21}\) The Norwegian and Nepalese battalions were similarly isolated and harassed. Indeed, the disjointed deployment of UNIFIL not only prevented it from fully achieving its tasks, but also greatly endangered the units that were isolated from the main body.

In a more benign peacekeeping environment, this isolation might be acceptable, as UNIFIL could place its units where they could mutually support one another in a seamless buffer zone. But in Lebanon, the hostility and noncollaboration of the belligerents has meant that “the UNIFIL area constituted an imperfect buffer between the opposing forces.”\(^\text{22}\) The hostility of the UNIFIL area, characterized by one commander as a “semi-war zone,” was obviously far from benign;\(^\text{23}\) to continue passive military operations in such an incoherently occupied zone of operations was beyond the pale of military logic. Nevertheless, such difficulties are often part and parcel of the strategic environment for a UN peacekeeper.

In attempting to “restore peace and security” to the area, the Security Council deemed it essential that the various UNIFIL contingents have both
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a common purpose and a continuity of operations. But both these objectives were hampered by the variety of operational procedures and differing rotation policies of the individual contingents. Considerable turbulence occurred within the force, for example, when member states pulled out their contingents. The pullout of the French and Iranian battalions in 1979 necessitated a "significant change in the deployment of the Force." Another major redeployment undertaken just before the 1982 Israeli invasion also weakened the UNIFIL force posture. In the northeastern area of UNIFIL operations, the 1982 withdrawal of the Nepalese battalion meant that the Norwegian contingent had to expand its area of operations substantially. UNIFIL never recovered control over this gap in its area of operations, and consequently, when the Nepalese rejoined UNIFIL in 1985, they were sent to an entirely different area in the Southeast. In 1998, the long-serving Norwegian contingent quit the mission; it has since been replaced by a battalion from India.

Nonetheless, UNIFIL did what it could. Operations settled into the conduct of mobile patrols and the occupation of observation posts and traffic control points in order to prevent a recurrence of fighting in southern Lebanon. When belligerents were determined to carry on with their actions, they either circumnavigated the understrength UNIFIL force by moving in small numbers or, as in the case of the IDF, merely ignored the UN presence. The atmosphere remained hostile, and veteran peacekeeper Gen. Indar Rikhye noted that "the number of shooting incidents against UN troops was comparable to the worst of the Congo experience." By January 1999, 222 UNIFIL peacekeepers had lost their lives; after the Congo, UNIFIL remains the costliest UN military operation.

The ineffectiveness of the Lebanese government, the continued belligerency of groups such as Hizballah, and the virtual control of the UNIFIL area by the IDF and the SLA since 1982 has sharply reduced UNIFIL’s chances of restoring peace and security to the area. Yet, during the 1980s and 1990s, no withdrawal of the IDF or its active proxies from southern Lebanon was likely as long as elements that threaten Israel were able to use the UNIFIL area of operations and surrounding area as a base for hostile actions against Israel. The UN was forced to accept this reality and to concede that Israel did not consider UNIFIL capable of ensuring peace and security in southern Lebanon. Recognizing this, throughout the mid-1980s, UNIFIL reduced the number of its positions throughout the area, especially those isolated in the security zone. In the 1990s, it streamlined its operations even further. This was a tacit admission of failure in maintaining an authoritative presence in pursuance of the missions set out in Resolution 425. But as Alan James has noted, “If one is simply in the business of flag waving, a lot of flags are not required.”
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Task 3: Assist in Restoring Lebanese Authority

UNIFIL operations supporting this objective have included assisting Lebanese government forces to occupy positions in the area and supporting Lebanese military operations in the restoration of local authority. Specifically, UNIFIL has focused on protecting the movement of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in the UNIFIL area of operations and conducting combined operations with the Lebanese government forces both to conduct patrols and to man observation posts and traffic control points.

These operations were never conducted in a sustained or serious manner. This was largely because of the failure of UNIFIL to make progress on its first two objectives, which were preconditions for fulfilling the third. The continued instability in the area, the continued presence of Israeli and hostile Islamic forces in the enclave and later the security zone, and the lack of authority exerted by the Lebanese government in Beirut all combined to hamper this mission. UNIFIL attempted to help deploy Lebanese gendarmes and army troops to the area but was frustrated by repeated attacks on the Lebanese columns by the various factions in southern Lebanon.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, UNIFIL greatly increased its humanitarian efforts to meet the growing needs of the rapidly expanding population of southern Lebanon. In 1978, the UN estimated that the population was at most a few thousand; by the time of the 1982 Israeli invasion, this figure had increased to 150,000. Since the invasion and particularly since the mid-1980s, UNIFIL has worked closely with UN relief agencies and other nongovernmental organizations to help coordinate and deliver humanitarian aid to a population that is now approaching half a million. The lack of Lebanese governmental authority led UNIFIL to assume many of the functions of the Lebanese government concerning the security and welfare of the population (much as Israel has done in the security zone it established in southern Lebanon).

UNIFIL continues to remain deployed in southern Lebanon largely because the Lebanese government does not appear capable of assuming these responsibilities itself. The implementation of the 1989 Taif accord led to the restoration of Lebanese governmental authority in Sidon, Tyre, Jezzine, and a number of villages in the Ghanaian sector of UNIFIL’s area of operation. UNIFIL, however, remains the de facto civil authority/civil service in much of its zone. In fact, if one reads the language in Security Council reports since 1982 that ask for a renewal of the force’s mandate, UNIFIL’s responsibility for facilitating the provision of humanitarian aid has become its primary raison d’être. This implied mission, which was not specifically a part of the original mandate, has made the disengagement of UNIFIL even more problematic. As one observer has noted, “the Force has been sucked into the economic and political fab-
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ric of the wider society in which it operates and of which it has become an integral part. UNIFIL increasingly has come to function as a pseudo-government for the South whose chances of being replaced by the appropriate authorities in the foreseeable future seem remote. This situation has led many observers to note that UNIFIL is now as much a part of the southern Lebanon problem as it is part of the solution.

RECENT OPERATIONS AND EVENTS

Since 1985, the basic political–military state of affairs in southern Lebanon has remained relatively constant. The IDF continues its occupation and reserves the right to retaliate for attacks on its troops and northern Israel. As long as the government of Lebanon is unable to exercise effective authority over this territory and prevent these attacks, the IDF is not likely to withdraw or even cease retaliatory options. For its part, the Lebanese government continues to insist that there is no possible justification for the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. In the meantime, Hizballah, Amal, and others profit from the confusion over authority and legitimacy, and over what lies ahead.

UNIFIL is well aware that it is a witting hostage to this environment but sees few alternatives. In its semi-annual reports to the Security Council, the UN secretary general’s office takes a “glass half full” approach to UNIFIL’s operations. It notes the small but important “role played by UNIFIL in controlling the level of violence in its area of operation and thus in reducing the risk of a wider conflagration in the region.” The office furthermore “stresses [UNIFIL’s] importance as a symbol of the international community’s commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Lebanon” and “reiterates the conviction that the solution to the problems of southern Lebanon lie in the full implementation of Security Council Resolution 425,” pointing “to the humanitarian assistance UNIFIL is able to provide from modest resources.”

To those ends, UNIFIL carries on with its daily operations: manning forty-five checkpoints on the principal roads in its area of operation, occupying some ninety-five observation posts to observe movement on an as-needed basis, and combining those functions in some twenty-nine other checkpoints and observation posts. Although it has a total strength of some 4,483 troops (not including civilians counted in the earlier figure of more than 6,000), light infantry battalions from Fiji, Finland, Ghana, India, Ireland, and Nepal provide the 3,500-odd soldiers that conduct the actual operations. While in its lifetime UNIFIL has had a few heavy weapons (the Dutch battalion, now gone, brought 120 millimeter mortars and anti-tank missiles), its overall composition is light, not armored, infantry. Patrolling is done on foot and by vehicle, but well within the longstanding passive rules of engagement.
In the last sixth-month period for which UNIFIL submitted a full public accounting of activity in its area of operations (July 1998–January 1999), its peacekeepers reported 386 operations by “armed elements” against the IDF and SLA and some 280 similar operations outside of UNIFIL’s area of operation. The majority of these operations were carried out by Hizballah, although the Shi’i militia Amal took responsibility for 30 of them. Some 3,000 mortar rounds, rockets, and anti-tank missiles were used. The IDF and SLA responded with more than 18,000 rounds of artillery, mortar, and tank fire—an increase of 70 percent over the previous reporting period—as well as seven air raids in UNIFIL’s area. The peacekeepers do little more than record these various violations, although UNIFIL has increased its efforts to protect civilian inhabitants from the fighting.

Despite the recent increase in the level of violence in southern Lebanon, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak remains committed to carrying out his election pledge to withdraw Israeli forces from southern Lebanon by July 2000. While the details concerning a possible Israeli withdrawal in all its permutations remain unclear, an examination of the various options for UNIFIL, as well as the likely UN response to three scenarios under which the IDF might withdraw from southern Lebanon, now follows.

OPTIONS FOR AN ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL: THE UN AND UNIFIL
UNIFIL faces a dilemma in the context of any scenario under which the withdrawal of the IDF from southern Lebanon might occur. On the one hand, it would want to see its mission accomplished and the full provisions of Resolution 425 realized. This would add UNIFIL to the fairly short list of UN peacekeeping success stories. With some missions lasting three, four, or even five decades, UN peacekeeping often faces the criticism that its presence represents not a solution, but the absence of a solution. On the other hand, under no circumstances is UNIFIL likely to substantively alter its size, force structure, command-and-control arrangements, or modus operandi in order to accomplish its mandate. In other words, UNIFIL would welcome the chance to complete its mission, but it is not likely to walk an arduous “extra mile” to do so. UNIFIL, like other actors, is keenly aware of one thing: it does not want to be left “holding the bag” as the principal authority enforcing peace, security, and order in the power vacuum of a post-IDF southern Lebanon.

As noted below, in some cases the UN mission would have to expand in both size and modus operandi to fulfill its duties after an IDF withdrawal. Under some scenarios UNIFIL could well expand slightly, alter its force structure and operating patterns in some small ways, and perhaps even grow into some new roles that would not be a radical break with its past. There is some room for growth at the margins, depending
on the opportunities presented and the amount of support provided by other local actors. But the constraints of the UN system, the lessons learned from a half-century of UN peacekeeping, and recent experiences with peace-enforcement operations will serve to anchor UNIFIL in something like its current form and role.

The constraints that militate against a dramatically different UNIFIL are formidable. Financially, UN peacekeeping is even more strapped than the regular UN budget (which it has exceeded in recent years). The UN spends some $140 million per year on maintaining UNIFIL and the operation is currently in debt by almost the same amount. In 1996 the secretary general mandated a 10 percent reduction in UNIFIL’s size as a cost-saving measure. Selling a 20–30 percent increase in UNIFIL’s budget would require the secretary general and members of the Security Council to invest some considerable political capital. Moreover, it would require a heavy investment of political capital by the American president, who would have to sell the increased financial burden to a very skeptical Congress (the United States currently finances almost one-third of the cost of UN peacekeeping).

In terms of management, the UN has learned much from its experience in directing large and ambitious peacekeeping operations in bellicose environments. The lesson of the Congo mission in the 1960s and of the missions in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Somalia in the 1990s is that the UN is best suited to manage smaller and less ambitious forces in more benign environments. Many at the UN felt that their most ardent supporters in America during the 1993–95 period dumped impossible missions such as Bosnia and Somalia in the organization’s lap and then refused to provide the support it needed to do anything except fail. The UN is finished with trying to control expensive and complex military operations that are best managed by a competent military alliance such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In recent missions such as Kosovo and East Timor, the UN has allowed a multinational military force to intervene first, following on with UN forces only after the environment has become more supportive. Therefore, even a fairly large expansion of UNIFIL would have to take place within the traditional passive rules of engagement and principles of peacekeeping; the UN has no wish (nor the resources and wherewithal) to manage heavy combat forces in a volatile environment.

Given these financial and political constraints, there is little room for movement toward altering UNIFIL’s size, composition, or mission. Nonetheless, two mitigating factors could make an expansion of UNIFIL possible. First, the chance to seize an opportunity for a peaceful solution to the problem of southern Lebanon will weigh heavily on even the most jaded Security Council members. If the expansion of UNIFIL’s mission
or mandate could potentially provide the decisive edge in a complicated equation, it could be approved. Second, UN peacekeeping is currently enjoying one of its periodic revivals, with three new missions having been approved in the autumn of 1999. An expansion of UNIFIL could ride this wave of enthusiasm. But even then such a move would likely happen only in small increments and within the context of very specific developments on the ground.

Withdrawal with a Comprehensive Agreement or Treaty

The Politics
An IDF withdrawal within the context of peace treaties with Lebanon and Syria is the preferred outcome from the standpoint of the UN. Moreover, the more comprehensive the treaty (involving Syria, the United States, and other outside powers in addition to Israel, Lebanon, and local actors), the more amenable the UN will be to taking extra measures to ensure its success. The United States and other permanent members of the Security Council, who would approve any change in UNIFIL's size or mandate in light of any treaty, would be more inclined to do so if regional powers are invested in the guarantees of the treaty. The possible details of such a treaty are outlined in other chapters of this book, but according to the UN’s priorities, the treaty would have to do the following:

- Obtain a commitment from Lebanon to prevent cross-border terrorism—this would include ground infiltrations and rocket attacks—and a pledge by both Israel and Lebanon to not engage in activities that threaten the security of the other.
- Create confidence-building measures such as a standing joint military committee to prevent accidental retaliation, hasty escalation, or other actions taken in response to small and uncoordinated incidents.
- Provide specific timetables for the IDF withdrawal, the disarmament of the SLA and Hizballah, and the reoccupation of southern Lebanon first by UNIFIL and then by the LAF.
- Address the status of the SLA, Hizballah, Amal, and other armed elements remaining in southern Lebanon.
- Create zones in which armaments are forbidden and those in which they are limited. Zones in which they are forbidden would have to take into account the proximity of the Haifa and Galilee population centers (vis-à-vis the range of newer katyusha rockets).
- Create a high-level monitoring group to assist UNIFIL in enforcing demilitarized and force-reduction zones.
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- Provide for automatic sanctions for violations of treaty provisions.
- Provide measurable, achievable, and sustainable goals for UNIFIL (i.e., an exit strategy).
- Provide international training programs and other assistance to the LAF to make it militarily competent to carry out the duties of border control and internal security in southern Lebanon.

The Operations

UNIFIL’s objectives in such a scenario would not depart greatly from its original mandate. Operations would differ in scale and complexity. In implementing a comprehensive agreement, UNIFIL would follow a pattern it used in “overseeing” the IDF withdrawals of 1978 and 1985. In the first phase, IDF and SLA positions would be turned over to UNIFIL in classic relief-in-place operations. In the second phase—one that may lag by several months to a year—UNIFIL would turn the positions over to the LAF. While the LAF is technically capable of carrying out security missions in southern Lebanon, it may move tentatively for political reasons—especially in the face of instability. This may necessitate a “go slow” program in which the LAF handles security only in those areas most receptive to its presence, only gradually taking over border control or moving into the more hostile areas.

In addition to influencing Hizballah, Syria’s army in Lebanon could help the LAF to assume control. No doubt, Syrians would seek ways to use such a presence to pressure Israel. But if Israel were to mute its objections to a Syrian military presence near the border, then the stabilizing effect on the LAF would have advantages in the long run. If the IDF has no objection to Syria playing a certain role in helping the LAF to establish competent control in the area, the UN will not complain. Conditions under which these handovers could take place would be explicitly outlined and agreed upon to prevent such operations from occurring prematurely (such as handovers made to a unit not capable of taking control or located in a volatile local environment). The operation would proceed from north to south, slowly but methodically approaching the international border.

UNIFIL would establish force limitation zones along the lines of those used in the Sinai. The zones would be established in accordance with the relative security concerns of each side (the range of artillery and rockets; nothing much could be done about aircraft). UNIFIL and the LAF, along with international monitors from a contact group (as specified in the April 1996 Understanding) would control the zones, and the contact group would impose strict sanctions on violators. Various confidence-building measures and joint groups would be implemented to reinforce the basic provisions of the zones. In order to temporarily allay concerns about long-range weapons that lay outside these zones, UNIFIL
could resurrect its long-moribund air operations. Because it has rarely been able to secure flight clearance from the IDF for operations over southern Lebanon, the UN has almost never used its small air arm for reconnaissance and monitoring. That capability could be enhanced, or the United States could offer the services of some high-technology monitoring devices as it does for the current multinational peacekeeping mission in the Sinai (the Multinational Force and Observers [MFO]).

In both the turnover of key security-control points and the monitoring of the arms control zones, UNIFIL would seek to live up to its name as an “interim” solution. It would act as the bridge between the IDF and the LAF, a bridge that could not stand without its two competent pillars. The cooperation of the principal actors—as well as the local adversaries—would be the key to success. UNIFIL would have to expand to carry out these tasks. A minimum of two extra battalions of mobile infantry would be needed as well as some specialized capabilities for monitoring and support (engineers, communications, and so forth). More sophisticated surveillance devices such as ground radar and artillery would also have to be deployed. All these reinforcements should ideally come from the professional armed forces of industrial nations. And in the event that this peace agreement is linked to a settlement in the Golan (a Syrian demand), the 1,200 troops of the UNDOF mission there could be folded into UNIFIL. The UN could conceivably be ready to put such a force in place—at least its initial elements—within two to three months.

Regardless, the force would still work under the principles of peacekeeping that would require strict impartiality and passive rules of engagement. UNIFIL would merely be a decisive complement to the willful actions of the Israelis, Lebanese, and others seeking to implement the peace agreement. The more this cooperation is present, the more likely the UN would be to reinforce UNIFIL and approve its mandate through the completion of its mission. If all went fairly well, UNIFIL could be phased out in two to three years. This is an optimistic assessment that assumes the political and security environment of southern Lebanon would be stable and generally peaceful within that timeframe. Even then, UNIFIL might stay on in a reduced observer capacity. Instability in the region after the implementation of this plan would considerably lengthen the phasing out of UNIFIL.

The Consequences

The security consequences of this scenario very much depend on the quality of the peace agreement, and the UN will not be able to do much to preclude a demise. This fundamental fact is often frustrating for local parties who seek a “silver bullet” solution from the UN. Quite to the contrary, UN peacekeeping (and UNIFIL in particular) is a self-help technique designed merely to complement the primary efforts of the
belligerents. Even an expanded UNIFIL that is competently and authoritatively carrying out its operations cannot thwart any party intent on bringing about the collapse of the peace process. UN operations like UNIFIL can bolster the confidence of the various sides when suspicions run high or nerves waver, but they can guarantee nothing.

The key to success is the transfer of authority for the peace, security, and order of southern Lebanon from the IDF and SLA to the LAF. As noted below, the will of the LAF to “take charge” is in some doubt in anything but the best of circumstances. Anti-Israel rejectionist groups or disgruntled SLA elements seeking to disrupt the process or sabotage the peace can serve this cause by attacking when both sides are weakest: the IDF in the midst of withdrawal, or the weak and fractious LAF in the act of taking over. In such a case, Israel would undoubtedly reserve the right to retaliate by both land and air in southern Lebanon, and the Lebanese government would probably abandon the most volatile areas. Some progress could be preserved in such a scenario if the transition were far enough along that actions were limited to cross-border air, long-range artillery, and rocket attacks only. This would represent somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory, but it might be an improvement over the status quo.

IDF Withdrawal in Coordination with Other Actors

The Politics

This scenario would be the next most desirable. Many of the political and operational dynamics would be the same, although important distinctions would remain that could have a significant impact on development on the ground. In this scenario, neither Lebanon nor Syria would be parties to a comprehensive peace treaty. Even so, lack of coordination among local actors could compensate in many respects for the high-level political cover that would otherwise be provided by an international treaty. The UN might be tempted to support a serious endeavor to implement Resolution 425 through the efforts of local actors. From a UN perspective, this scenario has many of the features of a withdrawal in the context of a peace treaty, though executed in what could be a less politically supportive environment. Still, with support from the United States and the Security Council, the UN might be enticed to try, seeing a coordinated withdrawal as a hopeful step toward the fulfillment of Resolution 425, rather than its consumation. For UNIFIL, this would be a tempting risk–reward proposition, if the possibility existed that Hizballah could declare victory and eschew violence and that the LAF could competently assume control of most of southern Lebanon after a few years.

The coordination involved in this sort of move would undoubtedly entail many of the same steps taken in the scenario involving peace trea-
ties. There would still be mechanisms for handing over security positions; some demarcation and intensive monitoring of force limitation zones; confidence-building measures; guarantees; sanctions concerning cross-border aggression; and provisions for the status of the SLA, Hizballah, the LAF, and other local actors. The chief differences would be that, absent high-level political participation (especially by outside powers), the potential for a violent breakdown could well be greater. Although it is possible that a heavy diplomatic hand from the United States could ameliorate some of the uncertainty accompanying the absence of a comprehensive peace agreement, it would not be able to replace Syrian influence. The Lebanese government and the LAF hold the keys to success, and that means Syrian acquiescence at the least. UNIFIL would play a central role and incur great risks in doing so. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to assume that the UN could see this as an opportunity worth seizing.

The Operations
UNIFIL would only take on this role if it sensed that the transition to Lebanese authority was realizable and sustainable, but it might also prepare itself for a bumpy ride along the way. Thus, while it would still operate within the basic parameters of a neutral peacekeeping force, UNIFIL’s operations would have to change in two respects.

First, because of the greater risk involved, the force would have to be expanded both quantitatively and qualitatively. This would require a new Security Council resolution and thus the investment of some political capital by the United States. Although new and more aggressive rules of engagement are not likely to be formally proffered, the new forces would undoubtedly be a little more robust (for defensive purposes) than the current UNIFIL troops that they would complement. A minimum of three to five battalions of well-armed mechanized infantry would be needed to help guide this transition. These would be expensive professional forces from industrial countries like the NATO allies. It is highly unlikely that the United States would contribute any ground troops given the current operational strain on the U.S. military that is associated with peacekeeping. Getting quality forces of this sort could be problematic because of the peacekeeping commitments of these countries in the Balkans and elsewhere. It is quite possible that UNIFIL would be promised such forces and then have to make do with ones less capable — thus hampering the mission. A particular problem is that the new forces could take months to arrive. It is difficult to see them being in place by July 2000 were Israel to withdraw by then.

Second, because the hand-off of security positions to the LAF would probably be delayed in many areas, UNIFIL forces could expect to stay much longer and perform a greater role in providing for the peace, se-
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security, and order of southern Lebanon. The goal would still be for UNIFIL to be an interim transition force between the IDF and SLA on the one hand and the LAF on the other, but the potential exists in this kind of scenario for the transition period to be both longer and more unstable.

UNIFIL operations, especially with a more robust force, would be centered on preserving the integrity of a buffer zone that would ostensibly run from the Israeli–Lebanese border to Tyre and then northeast to Marjayoun and Kaoukaba. As noted, special force-limitation zones along the coast and in the Jezzine salient would have to be rigorously monitored, as katyusha rockets in either of these areas could threaten Haifa and the Galilee, respectively. The challenge here would be that both these areas would lie well outside the UNIFIL zone. Lacking an official treaty supported by Syria and Lebanon, it could prove quite difficult to protect these areas. Moreover, a robust UNIFIL air component might be denied permission by both sides to conduct confidence-building monitoring and reporting. Thus, even if UNIFIL were to succeed in preventing significant ground operations in the areas it occupies, it might have to rely on the deterrent effect of the IDF’s air force and Hizballah’s katyushas upon one another to prevent an exchange over its zone. In this scenario, UNIFIL and the local actors would have to live with the limitations of effectiveness imposed by the general conditions in which the mission is carried out.

The Consequences

There are many uncertainties related to this scenario, not least the actions of Lebanese or Palestinian rejectionist groups that have shown a propensity for taking advantage of power vacuums. Recognizing this, Israel undoubtedly would withdraw in such a way that would preserve a considerable amount of latitude for retaliating on the ground and in the air. Local coordination required for an IDF withdrawal would have to be intense indeed if Israel were to cede its security zone to a reinforced UNIFIL with only vague promises of a competent LAF eventually filling in. Chances are that the IDF would hedge its bets enough to ensure that this would be a difficult if not impossible task for UNIFIL. Ultimately, this scenario could produce a southern Lebanon that is only slightly less volatile, but at least the IDF would have extricated itself to some degree. The UN’s role would be greater—which might deter some members of the Security Council and the international community from supporting the idea—but that hesitance could be overcome by Great Power pressure (especially from the United States), evidence of progress on the ground, and the absence of major setbacks for UNIFIL itself. An Israeli pullout that occurs prior to a full expansion of UNIFIL would likely create a power vacuum within which Hizballah could occupy former IDF and SLA positions, thus adding enormously to UNIFIL’s problems.
Unilateral IDF Withdrawal

The Politics
This is the least attractive option for the UN. From UNIFIL’s perspective a unilateral Israeli withdrawal would leave southern Lebanon with a power vacuum and consequently more unstable. This could lead the Syrians to encourage attacks on Israel and the Lebanese government to avoid taking control of territory in the South. Moreover, the UN would realize that a unilateral IDF withdrawal could only be sold domestically in Israel if the IDF reserved the right to strike back against attacks from southern Lebanon. The Israeli military options accompanying such a policy could take the form of ground incursions or massive retaliations against the civilian infrastructure in Lebanon. The potential for additional violence would deter the UN from expanding UNIFIL’s limited role to support this course of action. As noted, UNIFIL is a savvy local player and is well aware of its limitations. Even if tempted by the possibility of fulfilling the first provision of its twenty-two-year-old mandate, it would be deterred by the specter of being the primary force ensuring peace, security, and order in southern Lebanon.

A unilateral withdrawal seemingly offers a quick end to the most problematic aspect of UNIFIL’s mandate, but at a price. An important task would be accomplished but at the expense of leaving UNIFIL “in charge” of southern Lebanon. UNIFIL will not agree to such a bargain and will seek to fulfill its entire mandate only as a complement to the actions of the other local players. Even the possibility of “progress” toward fulfilling Resolution 425 will not outweigh the fact that UNIFIL would have to play the lead, not a supporting security role, in southern Lebanon after an IDF withdrawal. For this reason, there is little hope that the Security Council would support any expanded role for UNIFIL in this scenario.

The Operations
Lack of political support in New York would translate into lack of action in the field. The most likely response by UNIFIL would be to bear down in its current form—or perhaps contract even further. UNIFIL could not hope to occupy unilaterally the seventy-odd IDF and SLA positions both inside and south of its area of operations—even in the unlikely event that these positions were simply abandoned. Instead, the mission would likely concentrate on what has become its de facto reason for existence, which is to provide humanitarian aid, civil services, and some measure of support to local governance in the areas it currently occupies. Its posture would come to resemble that of 1979–81 when the IDF was “withdrawn” from southern Lebanon and UNIFIL found itself able only to observe an episodic border war fought in, around, over, and through its zone.
The Consequences

The consequences of this course of action are not entirely bleak. It is conceivable that Hizballah, Amal, and others will cease their attacks on Israel once southern Lebanon is “liberated.” If that happens, UNIFIL could act more vigorously (though still within its current size and mandate) to help the Lebanese government assume control of the region. If the situation turns out to be less benign, UNIFIL will try to ride the situation out, as it has in the past. In either scenario or in any scenario in between, UNIFIL will certainly not initiate action. It is simply not capable of driving the local situation one way or the other and would be leery of even attempting such action in the absence of a peace treaty or some closely coordinated withdrawal plan.

CONCLUSIONS

There is the hope in some quarters that the UN will “ride to the rescue” of southern Lebanon and play both a proactive and central role in an IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon. These hopes are misplaced. The character of the UN and of UNIFIL—neutral, passive, and reactive—would essentially condition its response in any scenario. The various roles that it could play differ mainly in terms of their scope, rather than their character. The UN will be more supportive of initiatives to reinforce UNIFIL and expand (at the margins) its size and mandate if an Israeli withdrawal occurs as part of a peace agreement. A peace treaty would rally the requisite political support for a reinforced UNIFIL, while the UN would not need many more troops to work in a supportive environment. Alternatively, if a closely coordinated withdrawal (absent a peace treaty) presents itself, the UN might be inclined to reinforce UNIFIL even more vigorously, as long as the Security Council (especially the United States) decided that the risk was worth the reward and that an authoritative Lebanese force could eventually and competently arrive on the scene in southern Lebanon. Any such reinforcement would be carried out within the context of peacekeeping. That is, UNIFIL would still be expected to be a supporting player, not the lead actor, in any scenario. The UN and UNIFIL understand well that one of the keys to success in southern Lebanon is not to be left “in charge” when things go sour. For this reason, UNIFIL is unlikely to take any extra measures to support a unilateral IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

NOTES

6. UN Department of Public Information (UNDPI), The Blue Helmets (New York: UNDPI, 1990), p. 113.
10. UNIFIL encountered two significant problems in these operations, however. The first stemmed from the fact that the UNIFIL area of operations had never been officially defined and agreed upon by all the parties concerned. By the end of the third phase of Israeli withdrawal in June 1978, UNIFIL had occupied the maximum amount of territory that it physically could, though that amount was only 45 percent of Lebanese territory occupied by the IDF south of the Litani River. In addition, the UNIFIL territory was effectively split into two separate zones, and is still divided by a gap some 15 kilometers wide in which UNIFIL has been able to maintain only a few isolated positions. The area of southern Lebanon under IDF control through its South Lebanon Army (SLA) proxy became known as “the enclave.” UNDPI, The Blue Helmets, p. 121.
12. The most thorough discussion of this interesting and perplexing issue on which opinions still vary widely can be found in F. T Liu, United Nations Peacekeeping and the Non-Use of Force (New York: International Peace Academy, 1992).
15. Ibid., para. 12.
19. Tasks are specified in S/12845, Report of the Secretary-General on UNIFIL for the period March 19 to September 13, 1978, para. 27.
22. UNDPI, The Blue Helmets, p. 131.
30. James, Peacekeeping in International Politics, p. 345.